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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR ENGAGES ASSISTANT MINISTER ON BURMA, ASEAN

1. (SBU) Summary: The Ambassador met with Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs Nguyen Trung Thanh September 22 to discuss Vietnam's role in ASEAN and other regional architecture institutions and how Vietnam can help advance political change in Burma. Thanh said Vietnam is heavily invested in ASEAN as an institution that both enhances peace and security for the ten member states internally, and allows them to "stand up as one" and interact more equally with other "strong powers." Thanh affirmed the primacy of APEC and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in Asian regional architecture and advocated an ASEAN-United States summit on the margins of the APEC summit in Hanoi in 2006. He described Burma as a wayward brother who brings shame on the family, but who must be dealt with carefully to avoid provoking a counterproductive reaction. End Summary.

ASEAN AND REGIONAL ARCHITECTURE

2. (SBU) Assistant Foreign Minister Nguyen Trung Thanh, who has responsibility for ASEAN affairs in the Foreign Ministry, told the Ambassador that for Vietnam, ASEAN represents "the peace and independence of member states and the ability to stand on their feet together with a common position to allow constructive engagement with strong powers that would not be possible as individual states." Now that the ASEAN member states have put their ideological differences behind them, ASEAN represents "an important element of our international politics and security." The main task, he said, is "to manage economic integration, through and beyond the ASEAN Free Trade Area, and use that economic integration to address transnational threats and build our common capacity." ASEAN's objective is to "reach 2020 as a cohesive whole and achieve the targets set in the Bali Concord." The date, he acknowledged, is notional, and probably would be moved up. "ASEAN is quite accustomed to adjusting the goal markers. We see this flexibility as a positive quality."

3. (SBU) Thanh said that, in looking at the East Asian Summit (EAS), it is necessary to put the meeting into the context of what ASEAN is trying to achieve overall. In that light, it is possible to see the EAS as an ASEAN+3 summit, which is an ASEAN goal. The EAS, he said, deepens and intensifies what can be accomplished in the ASEAN+3 framework. More importantly, the concept has evolved to include 16 countries, and now has become an important parallel mechanism to the ASEAN+3. The EAS will "cover strategic matters of the region and the world." From ASEAN's point of view, the EAS is a reflection of ASEAN's basic paradigm of internal development and constructive external engagement. The Ambassador said the news that the EAS would be open and inclusive is welcome to the United States, but the United States is still trying to understand fully how the EAS will fit with existing regional architecture and what the agenda will be. It would not be beneficial to ASEAN or the United States if the EAS diminishes the importance of other key mechanisms such as APEC and the ARF, he stressed.

4. (SBU) Thanh argued that practically speaking, Asia has no regional architecture comparable to what exists in Europe and the Americas. The purpose of the EAS is certainly not to derail or diminish existing regional architecture in Asia, but rather to help leaders get together, add value to existing mechanisms and build constructive and workable solutions for peace, unity and solidarity in the region. So far there is no full answer to those problems, despite the existence and importance of the ARF and APEC. The EAS would create another forum to discuss these important issues.

5. (SBU) ASEAN wants to continue to strengthen its partnerships with the United States, Japan, India, Korea and even Russia, Thanh continued. Of these, the United States is particularly important, which is why Vietnam proposed a stronger U.S.-ASEAN partnership at the U.S.-ASEAN dialogue in August. Vietnam believes ASEAN should continue cooperating with the United States on important issues such as terrorism, but also that the two sides should look at terrorism as something to be eliminated, and therefore ASEAN and the United States should consider ways to develop side-by-side economic and political cooperation that can be the basis of a long-term partnership. The Enterprise for ASEAN

initiative and the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement proposal are good steps, but both sides need to think about what else the United States and ASEAN can do together that reaches beyond the traditional bilateral activities and relations that exist today. The U.S.-ASEAN summit might be something along those lines. Whether it occurs or not is up to the United States at this point; ASEAN has already proposed it for the margins of the APEC summit in 2006.

16. (SBU) ASEAN-U.S. relations are already riding high based on good bilateral relations between many member states and the United States, Thanh said. In August at the U.S.-ASEAN dialogue, Thanh noted, Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia and Thailand were all either just coming off of or about to hold a successful leadership visit to the United States.

WTO. . .

17. (SBU) The best thing the United States could do now for Vietnam's interests and its own interests in ASEAN would be to conclude WTO talks with Vietnam, Thanh continued. He asked the Ambassador to consider how Vietnam operates in ASEAN now, and to recognize that a successful, economically healthy and strong Vietnam in ASEAN is in the United States' national interest because a "weak and muddled" Vietnam is vulnerable to pressure and influence from "other states," while a strong Vietnam contributes to a strong ASEAN that is a good partner for the United States. The Ambassador replied that at this point it is difficult to imagine Vietnam as "weak and muddled," even in the absence of an early conclusion to WTO negotiations.

18. (SBU) Thanh put in another plug for the United States to support Vietnam's entry into the WTO both in the bilateral negotiations and the multilateral talks. He made a parallel to Vietnam's entry into ASEAN in 1995, saying that at that time some countries said that Vietnam had so much economic reform to complete before AFTA requirements would be realistic that it would be at least 2005 or 2010 before Vietnam would be ready to join ASEAN. Vietnam made the case that it should be allowed to join ASEAN while making the necessary economic adjustments over time, a formula that had been very successful. "Vietnam's entry into ASEAN had positive effects that would not have been possible until much later if Vietnam had been held to an impossible economic standard," Thanh said. The Ambassador responded that it is up to Vietnam to accept the difficult aspects of international economic integration, which in this case include such thorny questions as telecommunications issues and economic liberalization.

BURMA

19. (SBU) Speaking of thorny issues, the Ambassador noted to Thanh that Burma's political problems and failure to change are a drag on ASEAN and an obstacle to many of Vietnam's and ASEAN's objectives. Thanh chuckled and said that as the official in charge of the 2004 Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) Summit in Hanoi, "Burma was on my mind 36 hours per day." Beginning a very labored metaphor, Thanh said ASEAN is a family with many brothers. One of those brothers is not doing well, but the answer to those problems is to keep him close and encourage him, not throw him out on the street. "If we throw our brother into the street, he becomes a victim of drug gangs, criminals and hostile neighbors," Thanh warned. The entire family is unhappy with the one brother's problems, he continued; they affect everyone. But your brother is like the finger on your hand, he said, and you would not cut off the finger because it had problems. The Ambassador said he understood Thanh's point, but that it is clear that Burma needs more encouragement to change.

110. (SBU) Thanh said that is clear to the GVN and that it is a mistake to consider Vietnam "aloof" from Burma's problems. He said Vietnam has sent several high-level delegations to talk to the Burmese leadership, including Presidential envoys and former Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet. The thrust of Vietnam's intervention with Burma is that Vietnam is aware of the difficulty of engaging in economic and political reform, getting on its feet after many years of fighting multiple enemies, "stabilizing internal problems from within" and ultimately regaining its political position in the region and in the world. "Doi moi (Vietnam's economic reform policy initiated in 1986) is the tool we used to do that, and we shared that with Burma," Thanh said. Vietnam is torn, he continued, between irritation at being seen as "dirt" in the international community as a result of association with "the brother's" behavior on one hand, and the "risk of our brother's exploitation by a mischievous neighbor" on the other. At the same time, Vietnam knows from its own experience that externally imposed solutions do not work, no matter how elegant. They must be "home grown" to have any chance of success. Adding more similes to his metaphors, Thanh said "imposing an external political

solution on our brother is like giving a large piece of Godiva chocolate to a starving man who is used to plain porridge. It may be rich and delicious, but it will only make him sick."

11. (SBU) Externally supplied political solutions have a bad track record in Southeast Asia, he declared. "Would you like to see one party become one hundred with violence and chaos?" he asked rhetorically, alluding to Cambodian politics. "You can call that democracy if you want, but it is not good for the country and it is not really democracy." Providing an ultimatum or a single choice to a country will make the situation even worse, he said. The Ambassador challenged Thanh's family model, saying that failure to confront problems in a family member was tantamount to enabling the bad behavior to continue, and said that Vietnam and ASEAN have an obligation to help Burma get its house in order. And while the ultimate solution would have to be Burmese, there are international norms of governance and human rights that have to be respected, regardless of whether they are considered indigenous. The situation in Burma is bad, the Ambassador reiterated, and it reflects badly on ASEAN. More can, and should, be done.

12. (SBU) Still, Thanh continued, the international community should be careful what it wishes for when it comes to Burma. International pressure convinced Burma to pass on the 2006 ASEAN Chairmanship, but that act enabled the generals to return to Burma and "do what they like with less international attention." The solution in Burma will have to be based both on principles and practicality, or else actions will have a counterproductive outcome.

13. (SBU) Comment: Thanh's discussion of Burma, despite the tortured metaphors, was as blunt as we have ever heard from high-level GVN officials. This was also the first acknowledgement we have had that former PM Vo Van Kiet's trip to Rangoon in 2004 addressed the issue of political change in Burma. The Vietnamese have as much influence as anyone with Rangoon, which is to say very little. But it is heartening to learn that they are focused on the problem and genuinely interested in a solution. End Comment.

14 (SBU) Bio Note: Nguyen Trung Thanh, Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs since 2003, speaks fluent British-accented English. He served in London as Deputy Chief of Mission in 1999 and earlier in his career in Canberra. He is married to the daughter of Foreign Minister Nguyen Dy Nien.

MARINE